The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE COMMITMENT OF LOVE

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An adamant young man, alone as he confronted his final destiny ... He had assented to a possibility in his being, of which he had had his first inkling when he returned from the desert. If God required anything of him, he would not fail. Only recently, he thought, had he begun to see more clearly, and to realize that the road of possibility might lead to the cross ... A young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility to the end without self-pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he has chosen, even sacrificing affection and fellowship when the others are unready to follow him — into a new fellowship.

Dag Hammarskjold
Markings

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Philippians 2:1-11
Matthew 21:1-11

**"Love bears all things, believes all things,
hopes all things, endures all things."**
I Corinthians 13:7 [NRSV]

It doesn't have to turn out this way. There is nothing in the script that says that he has to come to Jerusalem. Everybody in Israel wants to go to Jerusalem for Passover but not everybody goes every year. There is nothing that mandates that he go this year. It doesn't have to turn out this way at all.

Those who know him best and love him most don't want him to go, advise him not to go, try to talk him out of going. And when, in spite of their pleading, he decides finally that this is the year for him to go and turns his attention to the capital city, his best friends in the world follow reluctantly, with mounting trepidation and fear.

You can almost hear them: "You don't have to do this, Jesus. We could go next year. There's nothing wrong with staying up here in Galilee with our families. It's nice up here, quiet, your friends are here, it's safe. Your mother would be pleased. We could continue to teach and cultivate and plant the seeds of love. We could go next year. Why, Jesus, this impatience? Why this year? Why now? Why go at all?"

There are on Palm Sunday a number of important themes and the church historically has remembered and reenacted one of them, the triumphal entry to Jerusalem, the welcoming crowds, waving palm branches, stripping off their cloaks to prepare a royal carpet for the king. But the theme that has most intrigued me over the years is one that underlies the public festivity, the personal dimension, what the occasion must have meant to him, the question of why he came to Jerusalem in the first place. Over the years it has become my favorite incident in the Bible because I believe it defines a moment, a time, a necessary personal decision that comes to each of us some time or another.

What did coming to Jerusalem mean for him? It was for him, in some way, I conclude, a saying "yes" to his own life, an affirmation of what he had come to believe was his purpose, the meaning and significance of his life. If he was going to be Jesus of Nazareth, the man he believed God wanted him to be, he had to go. Furthermore, I conclude that it was for him an act of love: love for his people, his nation, love for his own life and love for God. I believe his decision to come to Jerusalem was his final testament, the actual living out of an idea he had increasingly thought about, discussed and taught, namely that somehow his life was a reflection, an instrument of love that God was, and that to give life in love is to realize the highest, holiest purpose of life. To give life away is to be alive. To lose life in love is to gain life.

The person who has deepened my understanding of Palm Sunday was no theologian, nor biblical scholar, but a banker and a politician, the late Dag Hammarskjold. He is one of my heroes, one of my saints.

Hammarskjold was a prominent Swedish banker who was elected to represent his country to the newly formed United Nations. In 1953 he was elected General Secretary of the United Nations. In 1957 he was reelected. And then, September 18, 1961 on a United Nations peacemaking mission, flying to negotiate a cease fire with rebel forces in what was Northern Rhodesia and is now Zimbabwe, his plane went down.

I didn't know much about Hammarskjold until he died, and then his journal was published, *Markings*, posthumously, and became a best seller. I was in seminary and, as is the case with most people in graduate school, wondering what to do with my life, wondering what path was the right one for me.

Hammarskjold's death, while he was deeply involved in the life of the world — on a peace making mission, turns out to be the first of four deaths in the decade of the sixties that not only defined the decade but was a powerful influence in shaping the world view of many people who lived through that time. Two years later John F. Kennedy was assassinated, then Martin Luther King, Jr., then Robert F. Kennedy.

The common thread in each one of their lives and deaths was a deep and unnecessary commitment to and involvement in the world. The Kennedys could have stayed home and enjoyed their wealth. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a distinguished clergyman and recognized scholar. He could have taught on the faculty of any major university in the land. Hammarskjold was a distinguished banker. Each of them had decided to leave comfort and safety and live public lives, lives invested in the life of the world, lives made very vulnerable by their exposure.

I concluded that it had something to do with love. Bobby Kennedy said as much in his last speeches. It was love for this country, love for neighbors, love for our children, that calls us to public service. And Martin Luther King, in one of the most powerful sermons ever preached, after the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, in which several little girls were killed, talked about the Christian mandate to love the world by getting involved in it and changing it, even loving the people who were doing hateful, violent acts.

When I read Hammarskjold's book I was intrigued by its spirituality. Hammarskjold himself was on a quest, trying to decide how best to live out his life, trying to identify what his life was about. And in that quest he was drawn to Jesus, on Palm Sunday, coming to the city.

As important to me as any words ever written is an entry in Hammarskjold's journal, *Markings*, in 1951, which is on the bulletin cover this morning.

> "A young man adamant in his committed life — an adamant young man, alone as he confronted his final destiny."

And then Hammarskjold probed deeper:

> "If God required anything of him he would not fail. Only recently, he thought, had he begun to see more clearly, and to realize that the road of possibility might lead to the cross. He knew that he had to follow it, still uncertain that he was indeed 'the one who shall bring it to pass' but certain that the answer could only be learned by following the road to the end." [p. 68-69]

It always seemed to me that Hammarskjold had caught the authentic sense of Palm Sunday and the meaning of the life of Jesus and the meaning of Christian life.

- A person struggling with the meaning and purpose of life, deciding to commit his life to a course that was by no means clear.
- A commitment with no guarantee of success.
- An intentional, courageous commitment of life, an intentional giving away of life , affirming life's meaning and purpose by spending it out, risking everything.

Christianity makes the important and demanding claim that giving life away in love is the way truly to live life, that committing oneself to the life of the world — whatever form that might take, through a profession, a cause, an organization, one's family, one's children, the giving oneself thoroughly and utterly — is the way to be oneself, to realize oneself, to become oneself fully and joyfully. Christianity claims that at least part of what is going on on Palm Sunday is Jesus showing us the way to live our own lives; God, if you will, teaching us a lesson in love; God showing us what love looks like.

About twenty years later one of Jesus' most fervent apostles, a man by the name of Paul, wrote a letter to a small community of the followers of Jesus in the Greek city of Corinth. Frankly, things did not look very promising for those Corinthian Christians. The city of Corinth was pretty much oblivious to them. And when anyone noticed them at all — because of their noisy arguing — it was always with an attitude of smug intellectual superiority. To the good people of Corinth these Christians appeared to be ignorant, foolish, with their odd notion of a God who becomes vulnerable in love, a God who becomes one of us, suffers with us and for us, and a God who ends up on a cross. The Corinthian intelligencia thought that was foolishness.

If that small, fragile church was to survive, its major problem would be how to relate to the world around it. The temptation, of course, was to withdraw from the world into the safety and security of their own little fellowship, to make of the new Christian community a kind of enclave from the world, cloistered socially and politically from all the ambiguities and perplexities of the world. It has always been Christianity's fundamental temptation and it is what lies behind St. Paul's letter to the Corinthian Church, particularly the famous soliloquy on love.

Without love, Paul said, your religion is like a noisy gong, your piety grates on God's ear like an obnoxious cymbal clash. Love is the heart of it, Paul wrote. Love that bears all things, believes, hopes and endures all things.

Paul's letter was a call to followers to live thoroughly in the world and to live in a way that conveyed love: their love for one another, their love for the world, their love for God, all of which, in Paul's estimation, was the best and only way to live out who they were as disciples of Jesus.

Jesus could not stay in Galilee and be honest to himself. The Corinthians could not retreat to the relative security of their little church. God's call to live out the life of love is a call to radical and deep involvement in the life of the world.

The great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

> "When we talk about love we have to become mature or we will become sentimental ... Basically love means that life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility, responsibility to our family, toward our nation, toward our civilization, and now, by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind which includes our own enemies." [*Justice and Mercy*, p. 35]

It has always been the primary temptation to be a religion which defines itself over against the world and not as part of the world; to be a church which is primarily an escape from the world, a safe, holy cloister from the noise and violence and complexity of our city, nation, world.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ — that God so loves the world — that God became one of us and got mixed up with all sorts of people and problems and sticky situations; that he — Jesus the Christ — so challenged the economic and political establishment that he was arrested as a disturber of the peace and executed for sedition ... that Gospel will not allow us to pull away from the world.

On this day, particularly, our faith reminds us of one whose love was so strong that he came to the city and of the simple truth that to believe in him and follow him is in some way to love our city, our world, and to assume, even when we do not have to, responsibility for it.

"Love bears all things," St. Paul said. The meaning of love is responsibility, Niebuhr observed. Responsibility as an expression of love is what the Christian church is all about.

I know of no more eloquent expression of that Palm Sunday motif than the remarkable motion picture, from the book, *Dead Man Walking*, by Sister Helen Prejean. Sister Helen, as you may know, is asked to write to and befriend a man who is a convicted murderer, waiting on death row in a Louisiana state prison. The movie does not sentimentalize or encourage sympathy for the convict. It tells the simple and powerful story of a love that will not turn its back on the world, even a tawdry, evil part of the world; a love that goes all the way to honor God's creation, even when that creation goes terribly wrong. Interestingly, according to Sister Helen, the religious people still don't understand that love when they see it. The old chaplain for death row prisoners doesn't understand. The parents of the victims don't understand at all.

Sister Helen, in the name of the one who loved the world — the city — the human race — simply will not abandon one of God's children no matter how far he has strayed, or the depths to which he has sunk.

Listen to her words as she describes the last hours of his life:

> "The guard inside is putting the shackles on Pat's hands and feet. He opens the cell door and Pat comes over to the metal folding chair by the door. As he approaches the chair his legs sag and he drops to one knee beside the chair. He looks up at me. 'Sister Helen, I'm going to die.'
>
> "My soul rushes toward him. I am standing with my hands against the mesh screen, as close as I can get to him, I pray and ask God to comfort him, cushion him, wrap him round, give him courage to face death, to step across the river, to die with love." [p. 88]

William Sloane Coffin says that the biggest problem that the Christian Church has is that it is afraid to love: not that its doctrine isn't orthodox or its morality pure, but that its love is inadequate. Wouldn't it be something, he asked, if we were free to love the world and our neighbors and our enemies and one another as Jesus did?

Wouldn't it be something if this church, the entire Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), all three million of us, or all the Christians in this city, were suddenly free to accept and embrace responsibility for our city, our world; for the education of all our children, for the health care of all our people, for the safety and security of all our citizens, for the rights of all our brothers and sisters? Wouldn't it be something if the Christian churches affirmed that and worked for that and assumed that responsibility instead of arguing about purity and orthodoxy and who gets in and who doesn't? I find myself wondering more and more these days if the dilemma of the churches, the decline of the mainline, doesn't have a great deal to do with our refusal to love by being responsible.

It was a defining day for Jesus. It was the day he decided to give his life, to commit himself completely to living out his sense of God's call. It was for him, the day he was truly himself.

Dag Hammarskjold wrote, not long before he died,

> "I don't know who — or what — put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer yes to someone — or something — and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self surrender, had a goal." [p. 205]

You and I are on a pilgrimage of sorts, at a particular stage in the journey that is our life. For one reason or another we find ourselves here, listening again to a story we have heard many times before, of a young man who came to Jerusalem for the Passover and five days later died on a cross. This time may we ponder what it all meant to him, how much of this day he intended as an expression of his truest and best self, his deepest faith and most passionate love. And may we hear, in his story, the love God has for the world and for our city and for our neighbors and also for ourselves; that just as he decided to come to the city, he has decided to love you, to claim you, to be and to reign in your heart.

And, with the echoes of "Hosannas" and the cheering throngs still ringing in our ears, may we, this day, resolve to follow him by saying "Yes" to our own lives and then by giving them away in love.

Amen.